ΟΜΙΛΙΑ ΑΡΧΗΓΟΥ ΓΕΕΘΑ

σε Ημερίδα του ΥΠΕΘΑ/ΓΔΠΕΑΔΣ με Θέμα:

«Western Balkans in the Current Context of

Security Challenges and Threats»

It is an honour to address you today on the occasion of Conference "Western Balkans in the Current Context of Security Challenges and Threats" and, in particular, to be part of this panel alongside such distinguished and esteemed fellow speakers. Let me start by stating that geography produces history, and this phrase has over the centuries been depicting an indisputable reality in the Balkan region.

First, allow me to thank the *General Directorate of National Defence Policy and International Relations of the Hellenic Ministry of National Defence* for the outstanding initiative to organize this conference, which undoubtedly serves as a pivotal event for conducting a thought-provoking dialogue on the multifaceted security challenges besetting the Western Balkans. Diverse perspectives are invaluable to our understanding of these pressing matters, and I look forward to being introduced thereto.

To begin with, the Western Balkan region is at a geopolitical crossroad, with great strategic importance, attracting the interest of various global powers and is pivotal in shaping the future landscape of the European Union.

European Union's integration remains a primary aspiration. Nevertheless, Russia, China and other state and non-state actors compete for influence through economic investments and diplomatic engagements affecting regional dynamics, particularly human and economy-level security,

using stealth, hybrid and – to a great extent – asymmetric influence campaigns, leveraging information manipulation.

The principle of the rule of law and good governance holds immense significance in shaping human and economy-level security in the Western Balkans. Understanding the impact of this principle is crucial in evaluating its effects on stability, prosperity, and the overall security landscape of the region. Embracing and implementing effective governance practices and rule of law principles are indispensable for ensuring a secure and prosperous future for the Western Balkans region, which could be described as a "patchwork" in the sense that different religions and empires have left their mark on its history.

The importance of sustaining the EU-accession agenda (for the WB countries) is directly related to the region's stability and prosperity. There are three factors that could prevent the EU-accession agenda from decline. First and foremost, the EU itself should lead the region towards EU membership. Secondly, the EU should keep this agenda alive against internal challenges including political ones. Last but not least is the ability of the authoritarian and revisionist forces to challenge the stability dominance of the EU and with that to undermine the very essence of the cornerstones on which regional stability depends. This is usually a love-hate relationship and in parallel, other players leave their footprint on the region. The limits of the EU's soft power are often tested by Russia.

The Western Balkans region has long been characterized by complex and often fragile inter-ethnic and political relations, creating an environment prone to ethnic and political tensions. Understanding these tensions as an emerging security trend in the region is essential for assessing the potential

risks and challenges they pose, and developing strategies to mitigate them. The culture of conflict underlines the importance of a careful approach when it comes to history and security. Some of the above factors reach the ground of a region, locked between nostalgia for the past and uncertainty for the future.

This region has been a hotspot for various forms of organized crime and corruption. Understanding the evolving nature of these criminal activities is urged by the negative effects on security. Therefore, predicting their future trajectory is essential for devising effective strategies to combat these corrosive practices that disturb economic growth, undermine prosperity, erode public trust and affect safety and human and economy-level security.

Violent extremism in the Western Balkans represents a complex and evolving challenge. Understanding current trends and potential evolutions in this landscape is crucial for effective preventive measures and counter-extremism strategies in the region. This requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses socio-economic vulnerabilities, utilizes effective counter-narratives, strengthens law enforcement capabilities, fosters regional cooperation and promotes effective governance. Proactive and collaborative efforts are imperative to mitigate the evolving threats and build resilient societies in the Western Balkans. Military cooperation is a key part to improve interoperability, promote stability, and mutual understanding.

Migration and border security are pivotal aspects, shaping the security landscape in the Western Balkans, driven by various factors such as geopolitical dynamics and global migration patterns. Understanding these trends and their potential evolution is crucial for assessing their impact on

regional security. Regional cooperation and international support would be imperative for managing migration dynamics and ensuring security.

Regional and, more specifically, military cooperation also stands as a crucial pillar for stability and progress, profoundly impacting the region's security landscape. Recognizing the trends in regional cooperation and their possible evolution is pivotal in addressing their influence on security dynamics. In general, the security of regional cooperation depends on the EU's integration aspiration as well as bilateral and multilateral agreements. Continued EU support for Western Balkans's integration processes will encourage and sustain regional cooperation efforts. Investing in strengthening regional ties, resolving disputes through dialogue and sustaining commitments to cooperation will be imperative for ensuring the Western Balkans' peaceful and prosperous future. It is abundantly clear that the region needs to catch up with regard to its infrastructure, energy efficiency – autonomy and climate targets and of course investments in technology.

Economic challenges, encompassing demographic decline and other socioeconomic factors, like youth unemployment, significantly influence the security landscape in the Western Balkans. Acknowledging these trends and their developing status is crucial in comprehending their impact on regional security. Along with regional cooperation, international support is also crucial in navigating and mitigating the evolving economic challenges facing the Western Balkans. Reforms in the digital sphere should not only reduce the divides, but also work in favor of combating corruption, improving the rule of law, facilitating online commerce, and raising awareness over the multilayered challenges of disinformation and, in some cases, cyber threats.

The aim is to counter existing challenges and fortify existing structure for the years to come. The current security landscape and the discerned trends lay the groundwork for the policy recommendations that should follow. These recommendations, in turn, seek to shape the future for regional security cooperation in the Western Balkans, guided by a holistic approach and not through a process, which usually runs out of steam following the personal and political changes. I will conclude by saying that we must absolutely remain focused on solving all these security dilemmas, with a crystal-clear roadmap, because hope is not a strategy.

Thank you for your attention.